

Testimony from The Nature Conservancy to
the Colorado General Assembly's
Wildfire Matters Interim Committee
September 4, 2015

- Good Morning. My name is Paige Lewis and I am the Forest Restoration and Fire Program Director for The Nature Conservancy in Colorado. I am joined by Jason Lawhon, The Conservancy's Colorado Fire Manager and the leader of our 7 person fire crew.
 - The Nature Conservancy is a non-profit conservation organization working around the world to protect the lands and waters on which all life depends.
 - Our work in Colorado focuses on 3 priority areas: conserving native grass and rangelands; sustaining meaningful flows in rivers and streams; and, of course, improving forest health and fire management.
- **I want to begin by thanking you for devoting time on your agenda to this important topic.**
 - While Colorado has had a reprieve from direct wildfire impacts this year, many other states and communities across the West have not – with devastating and tragic results.
 - And when it comes to wildfire in Colorado, we can be sure that it is not a question of IF but WHEN we will see another record-setting wildfire season.
 - We owe it to ourselves, to our children and to future generations to ensure that we are effectively using all the tools that are available to us for reducing wildfire-related risks to our homes, our communities, our watersheds and to the natural beauty that drew many of us to Colorado in the first place.
 - One of those essential tools is fire itself.
- In our brief time today, I would like to **offer some thoughts on the current state of prescribed fire in Colorado and share some recommendations** on how the General Assembly could improve our ability to safely and effectively use prescribed burns to reduce risks to communities and improve the forest for future generations.
- **Why fire? Prescribed fire offers unique hazard reduction and ecological restoration benefits that cannot be achieved through other forest management tools alone.**
 - Both researchers and land managers have found that the combination of forest thinning followed by broadcast burning provides the most complete fuel treatment by reducing canopy, ladder AND surface fuels, thereby providing maximum protection from severe fires in the future.
 - Mechanical treatment, on its own, can reduce crown fire potential by thinning and opening up the forest and by removing small trees and other ladder fuels that carry fire from the forest floor into the canopy.

- But mechanical treatment does not address, and may actually contribute to, the slash, small woody debris, needles and other surface fuels that often remain after forest treatment and are the primary carrier of fire in Colorado's dry forest types.
 - If not addressed, these surface fuels can significantly increase a wildfire's severity and rate of spread – exactly the outcome that the mechanized treatment was meant to avoid.
 - The potential for negative impacts from an incomplete fuel treatment was revealed in the 2010 Four Mile Canyon fire west of Boulder. In their review of the fire, U.S. Forest Service researchers found that heavy surface fuels left behind in previously thinned areas contributed to higher fire intensities and rapid rates of spread.¹ They further noted that the use of a low-intensity prescribed fire could have mitigated the potential for these impacts.
 - Areas where complete fuels treatments have been implemented are important to firefighters because they can provide a refuge during wildfire suppression and can serve as the most logical, safe and tactical starting points for launching suppression actions.
 - Prescribed fire is also a cost-effective way to maintain the benefits achieved through past mechanical treatments, thereby protecting the significant public investment that these initial treatments require. And it offers unique ecological benefits such as nutrient cycling and rejuvenation of forage and habitat for wildlife that other forest management tools do not replicate.
- **Time is of the essence in restoring and enhancing Colorado's ability to effectively use prescribed burns as a management tool.**
 - According to data gathered by the Colorado Air Pollution Control Division, the use of fire for management has dropped significantly, beginning in 2008 – before the tragic events of the Lower North Fork Fire – and has not rebounded.
 - In addition, fire management activity is increasingly concentrated in pile burning – which is essentially slash disposal -- rather than broadcast burning that can achieve a broader range of risk reduction and forest restoration objectives.
 - We must find a way to increase the use of prescribed fire by land managers at all levels in Colorado.
 - We applaud the Governor's recent decision to rescind his 2012 Executive Order placing a ban on the use of fire by state employees and on state lands. And we sincerely thank those of you who showed leadership in encouraging him to take this action.
 - But we must now ensure that prescribed fire projects go forward.
 - If we choose not to use prescribed fire when it is safe and effective to do so, we are essentially deferring our fire risk to a less controlled and, likely, more damaging and costly wildfire event in the future.
 - In a wildfire situation, we are asking firefighters and communities to respond to fires under the worst conditions. The extensive planning involved in prescribed burns gives us much

¹ Graham, Russell; Finney, Mark; McHugh, Chuck; Cohen, Jack; Calkin, Dave; Stratton, Rick; Bradshaw, Larry; Ned Nikolov. 2012. Fourmile Canyon Fire Findings. Gen. Tech. Rep. RMRS-GTR-289. Fort Collins, CO: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Rocky Mountain Research Station. 110 p. http://www.fs.fed.us/rm/pubs/rmrs_gtr289.pdf

greater ability to select the conditions under which we choose to have fire and can mitigate most of this risk.

- **The State of Colorado should be a leader in the safe and effective use of fire for resource management.**
 - The policies and actions of state government, even outside of a regulatory framework, have a tremendous impact on the operating environment in which other landowners and land managers work.
 - With this in mind, I'd like to offer some recommendations on how the General Assembly could assist the land management community in using all the tools in the tool box to reduce wildfire risks and promote healthy forests into the future.

Recommendations:

1. Foster a supportive and effective operating environment for the use of prescribed burns, both pile burns and broadcast burns, in Colorado.

- There are number of steps that the State can take to ensure that prescribed fire practitioners at all levels have the tools and resources they need to operate safely and effectively.
 - Sustain current **state grant programs** that support forest management and wildfire risk reduction and ensure that these programs allow grant recipients to include the use of both pile burning and broadcast burning in their projects if appropriate.
 - Fully fund the WUI Risk Reduction Grants managed by DNR.
 - Continue to fund the Colorado Watershed Restoration Grant Program managed by CSFS.
 - Support the Colorado Department of Public Health and the Environment continuing and expanding their use of more **flexible smoke management permits** that enable land managers to implement larger-scale and/or more cost-effective projects while still addressing public health and air quality concerns.
 - Continue implementation of the new **Certified Burner Program** and begin to expand training to include more advanced qualifications that will benefit local and county land managers working to implement effective watershed and community protection projects.

2. Ensure that the state agencies and employees are leaders in the use of prescribed fire.

- The state burn ban has been lifted, but state agencies appear hesitant to return to the use of prescribed fire in any significant way – particularly for uses beyond pile burning. If this situation continues, the State stands to lose both capacity and opportunity while forest conditions and wildfire risk in the state further deteriorates. We recommend:
 - Working with the Governor and the Division of Fire Prevention and Control to encourage the use of both pile and broadcast **burning on state lands** and by state employees.

- Continue to **monitor the question of liability protection** for state employees that are using prescribed fire as part of their professional management responsibilities and ensure that lack of liability protection, either real or perceived, does not serve as a barrier to fire use.
- Foster close coordination between the Division of Fire Prevention and Control and the Colorado State Forest Service to ensure we utilize and support all **forest science and fire management** expertise we have in the State.
- Support critical **prescribed fire training** for state employees to ensure that the state increases and sustains its capacity to use fire for natural resource management.

3. Encourage a Fire Adapted Communities approach in Colorado's Wildland Urban Interface.

- Fire Adapted Communities is a national movement -- supported by land managers, fire fighters, county commissioners and others -- that is designed to help communities and their partners take a more comprehensive approach to community wildfire preparedness and to acknowledge the realities of living in a fire prone environment.
- There are currently three regional hubs for the Fire Adapted Communities network in Colorado, but the approach is one that could and should be applied statewide.
- A FAC is defined as one where "Community leaders and residents accept responsibility for living in an area with wildfire hazards. They have the knowledge and skills and have adopted tools and behaviors to prepare in advance for their community's resilience in a wildfire prone environment."
- We must support communities in proactively addressing their risk from wildfire if we are ever to be able to reduce that risk across the landscape in a meaningful way.
- To that end, we recommend that the General Assembly consider steps that the State might take that would both support and incentivize continued proactive approaches by WUI communities.
 - Sustained **financial resources** (see reference to key grant programs above) with preference given, when appropriate, to communities that are initiating or launching proactive steps toward wildfire risk reduction and community preparedness.
 - Consideration of a voluntary **statewide standard for wildfire mitigation** along with incentives for those counties or communities that choose to adopt the standard.

I would like to conclude by reiterating that time is of the essence in taking steps to ensure Colorado has all the tools it needs to effectively restore our forests and reduce risks to our communities. The need and the opportunity are there. The State of Colorado must step up to this challenge.